

White Paper

Freedom's Movement: Mapping African American Space in War and Reconstruction

Co-Project Directors: Scott Nesbit, Alisea Williams McLeod, & John Clegg

1. Project Activities

Work on Freedom's Movement consisted of two primary activities: expanded research into an especially promising cache of documents related to "contraband" camps and preparations for and execution of a meeting of leaders of nationally recognized projects related to genealogy, history, and emancipation.

Dr. Alisea Williams McLeod spent several days working in the National Archives obtaining scans of more than fifty "contraband" camp registers. Upon her return, students at the University of Georgia and elsewhere (not using federal funds) transcribed these documents.

The team hosted a productive meeting for scholars and genealogists at the University of Georgia in June 2019. The group was small by design: eleven participants held robust conversations related to their projects, their methods of doing work in the realms of data management and community outreach, and commonalities and differences among represented projects. Attendees included:

John Clegg, University of Chicago

Lauren Cooper, University of Delaware

Hollis Gentry, Smithsonian Institute

Patrick Lewis, Filson Historical Society

Brandi Locke, University of Delaware

Emily McGinn, University of Georgia

Alisea Williams McLeod, Rust College

Aaliyah Muhammed, University of Chicago

Robert K. Nelson, University of Richmond

Scott Nesbit, University of Georgia

Joshua Rothman, University of Alabama

Two anticipated participants found it necessary to drop out as plans were made

for the meeting. We added participants Lauren Cooper, Brandi Locke, and Aaliyah Muhammed, who were not originally scheduled to participate. We were pleased with the contributions of these added members.

The meeting included three primary working sessions, along with time set aside for visiting participants to get to know each other informally. The first session focused on project introductions, as each participant introduced their own work and their project to other participants. This was revelatory, as even familiar projects had aspects of their design and operating procedures that are not easily gleaned from public sources. During a break period, the team then took advantage of their setting at the University of Georgia, taking a brief tour of the Baldwin Hall site, led by project co-director Scott Nesbit. This had become a site of controversy over the university's response to its discovery of a graveyard containing the remains of enslaved people underneath a planned expansion of the building. The second and third meeting sessions focused on data standards across the projects, community outreach standards, and potential for collaboration among meeting participants.

While we came away from the meeting energized about our individual projects, the meeting participants did not envision ways to forge robust, cross-project collaborations. Indeed, participants eagerly await results of large, heavily-funded initiatives such as the "Enslaved" project at Michigan State, which seeks to link disparate databases related to slavery and the slave trade. Instead, a model of friendly, ad hoc collaboration was preferred by most members of the group instead of a formalized blueprint for future work among all participants.

2. Accomplishments

Freedom's Movement enjoyed several accomplishments during the grant period:

- (1) The team, representing three strongly-related sub-projects, convened for a two-day colloquium representatives from several digital initiatives related to the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction. (See description under "Project Activities.")
- (2) The team completed transcription of more than fifty "contraband" camp registers, distinctive Civil War era documents capturing rich information for individual freedpeople and family groups. The team also identified *additional* registers, expanded and complicated the definition of register and designated a variety of documents to be included under the term, and, fifthly, outlined concrete plans for continued search and discovery of these significant documents.
- (3) A member of the team spent a week at the National Archives identifying new sources for study of the contraband phenomenon, specifying new record groups to be examined.
- (4) Initial GIS coding of camp locations and cross-referencing of individual "records" within the registers, with decennial and other censuses in order to map plantation residences (reported by freedpeople), ultimately, to trace their

movements. Freedom's Movements has already experienced an encouraging degree of success on this specific goal.

- (5) The team used ongoing collaboration and conversation around collected archival materials to move slowly and thoughtfully toward renewed theories of emancipation and Reconstruction.
- (6) The team--multi-disciplinary--affirmed its approach as a digital humanities project while also making room for critical conversations including human and personal aspects of sensitive historical work involved in digitizing records related to slavery in the U.S.

In June 2019, the team met with the Civil War Governors of Kentucky (Digital Documentary) Project, American Panorama Project (University of Richmond), The Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project, The Colored Conventions Project (University of Delaware), and the Freedom on the Move Project (Cornell University). The meeting had as a primary goal determining the feasibility of linking data from the various projects, a prospect to be determined by the practicality of developing uniform standards across projects. Although the consensus, after vigorous discussion, was that standardization would not be practical since most of the identified projects are well underway, excitement was expressed by several attendees around developing a clearinghouse for projects on Civil War and Reconstruction. While Freedom's Movement had hoped to include in the colloquium several family history researchers, two invited guests were unfortunately unable to attend; a third, from the Freedmen's Bureau Project expressed interest in collaboration.

A follow-up meeting is planned for June 2020 at the University of Chicago.¹ The second meeting, an activity of the "Practices of Emancipation" research project, is made possible through grant support from The Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, which is also funding an eleven-month research fellowship for team member Dr. Alisea W. McLeod (Rust College), who will during the summer of 2020 search several record groups for possible "new" registers.

While there is as yet no centralized website for the three original projects represented by the three team members, Scott Nesbit, Principal Investigator; McLeod, Co-Investigator; and John Clegg, Harper Schmidt Fellow at U Chicago and proposal writer, with English professor Christopher Taylor, discussion of the most appropriate platform for bringing information critical to study of the American and African-American past is primary item on this meeting's agenda.

Ongoing conversations elicited personal (familial) connections--for this project's developers--to the subjects of slavery, Civil War, and Emancipation. Such connections encouraged critical thought on bridging of personal and academic/intellectual perspectives and affirmed appropriate inclusion of this important conversation in future meetings. Such connections emerged as a force, together with a strong sense of digital humanities as ideal strategy for

¹ The meeting has been rescheduled for a fall date due to the coronavirus pandemic.

publicly-engaged historical work, for our commitment to further developing Freedom's Movement and creating a plan for its sustainability.

3. Audiences

The primary audience for this project has been the wider fields of digital humanities, public history, and genealogy, and specifically those digital historians, public historians and genealogists working on providing public access to digital sources on slavery and emancipation. These fields were well-represented among the meeting participants, which included genealogists, public historians, and a number of different crowd-sourcing projects working on data related to African Americans during slavery, the Civil War and the postbellum 19th century United States.

One goal of our meeting was to identify common ways to expand the outreach of our projects to historically under-served communities, especially African American communities who form both the primary constituency and primary subject-matter for our projects. Three of the most successful projects in this respect— The Freedmen's Bureau Transcription Project, Colored Conventions, and Freedom on the Move—narrated how each developed different strategies for their outreach. The Freedmen's Bureau project was able to make productive use of the physical space allotted to it by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as well as to collaborate with genealogical organizations like Family Search. Colored Conventions had developed a nation-wide network of committed collaborators, many of them associated with churches and community groups. Freedom on the Move relied heavily on social media outreach and developing connections to educational institutions via constructing lesson plans around their project. In the meeting each project discussed the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches for reaching under-served communities, while exploring ways to adopt aspects of each approach in their own project.

4. Evaluation

The project meeting went through an informal evaluation session as our last activity during our June 2019 meeting. Attendees were appreciative of the opportunity to get to know other projects, their personnel, their data, and their methods for building community. Attendees were appreciative at the diverse representation at the meeting. At the same time, it was agreed widely that the stretch goals for the meeting--a more robust collaborative effort--would be premature and likely impracticable.

In later evaluative conversations among the project directors, we came away from the project encouraged in our own efforts. The face to face meeting--the first face to face meeting among project directors--was helpful in building our working

relationship. The project led directly to a number of positive outcomes, detailed below in sections 5 and 6.

5. Continuation of the Project

Freedom's Movement will continue after the closing of the present award. The team has identified both short-term and long-term goals for the project.

Short Term Goals/Plans

- Convene a meeting in the fall of 2020 to (a) plan concrete strategies going forward, with specific collaborators, e.g. The American Panorama Project (University of Richmond) and the Freedmen's Bureau Project.
- Increase the number of "contraband" registers and related materials that will form, together with Visualizing Emancipation and Civil War Soldiers, a combined project database.
- Create a centralized database for project-specific documents--camp registers and related materials--as a first step toward linking data for Visualizing Emancipation, Civil War Soldiers, and Last Road to Freedom.
- Determine date of publication of project and develop public-relations strategy for publication of (sensitive) project data.
- Seek funding for the next stage of the project's development, diversifying potential sources and, in the process, potentially expanding the audience.

Long Term Goals/Plans

- Maintain Freedom's Movements as a collaborative effort of identified projects--Visualizing Emancipation, Civil War Soldiers, and LastRoad--related to the U.S. Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, continually inviting conversation with other, extant or emerging, projects.
- Thoughtfully and continually approach Freedom's Movements as a public-facing project, a notable example of publicly-engaged humanities.
- Maintain a dynamic, publicly-accessible digital platform of interest to genealogists and scholars of the U.S. Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction.
- Develop sub-projects related to the project's main goals, i.e. new efforts that (1) engage identified audiences in new ways and (2) sustain the project's vibrancy and perspective.
- Reflect upon use of Freedom's Movements' database as a contribution to public and digital humanities.
- Appropriately diversify platforms and/or media as appropriate to include possibility of scholarly publications.
- Achieve project sustainability through securing long-term sponsorship or

funding from a combination of institutional and philanthropic support.

6. Long Term Impact

The major impact of our meeting and the continued forms of collaboration that have emerged from it will be on the subsequent trajectory of each project. We believe that the projects have already benefited substantially by learning from each other. Over the coming years, as we put these lessons into practice, we are especially keen to identify areas of success and failure with outreach, integration and sustainability.

By comparing website metrics on crowd-source participation and the use of our data by the general public we will be able to track what strategies generate the most engagement, especially from historically under-served communities. By continuing to develop a common set of data standards we will provide future projects with the infrastructure that we have developed. And by linking our projects and establishing an online network of digital archives we will be able to ensure that the public has continued access to the data that we have collected.

One effect that our meeting has already had is that it has led to, and helped to secure funding for, a three-year research project at the University of Chicago in which two of the meeting's organizers will collaborate. The [Practices of Emancipation](#) project, funded by the The Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, will further explore links between the USCT and contraband camp records that have been one motivation for Freedom's Movement. For this project John Clegg is acting as co-principal investigator and Alisea McLeod will spend one year at the University of Chicago as a visiting scholar. One of this project's goals is to organize two meetings that will act as follow-ups to the Freedom's Movement meeting at the University of Georgia.